

## The restoration of the oysters

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GREAT WICOMICO RIVER--Two boats moving in tandem along this river at the tip of the Northern Neck last week symbolized the best hope to date for re-establishing oysters in the Chesapeake Bay.

Aboard the smaller vessel, an open skiff, workers in coveralls and slickers dumped dozens of baskets of specially bred disease-resistant oysters into the waters of the river that empties into the bay near Reedville in Northumberland County.

On the cabin cruiser shadowing the skiff, officials from a coalition of state and federal agencies celebrated the start of this oyster restoration project--the biggest ever attempted.

In the next month or so, some 15 million oysters will be planted on nearly four acres of bottom here, baby bivalves of a strain bred to resist the diseases that have decimated nearly 98 percent of the bay's oysters since the '80s.

The gaggle of project partners watching from the bow of the borrowed yacht were upbeat as 350,000 or so oysters were planted on the first day of the project.

Partners in the project included the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and some private concerns. These partners in the first coordinated, large-scale project to save the troubled bay oyster are hopeful that after years of little success, this may be a breakthrough.

"We've had projects on smaller scales, a million oysters in one spot or another," said Stan Allen, the scientist who oversaw the development of the disease resistant "DEBY" oyster at VIMS. "But we've never been able to put in 15 million in one spot. This may be what it takes ."

One key is the federal funding and assistance that comes when agencies like the Corps of Engineers and NOAA join state agencies in the effort.

So far, \$2.5 million has been spent for the preparation of the oyster beds and the purchase of the 15 million seed oysters.

Doug Martin, manager of the oyster project, said that a test planting last year of 11/2 million oysters on the Great Wicomico, along with consultation with local watermen, led to changes in this year's full-scale planting.

To keep the young oysters from becoming dinner for voracious cow-nosed rays that inhabit the waters, special mesh fences will be in place around the beds from May until the end of September, their tops extending above the waterline.

"Even with that predation last year, we still managed a 30 percent increase in the number of oysters in the beds," said Martin. "That has us very hopeful for this year's seeding."

He said the hope is that the disease-resistant oysters will reproduce yearly and cover the beds with a huge crop of baby oysters--called spat--"the likes of which the river hasn't seen in decades."

While the oyster beds planted in the five-year restoration project won't be harvested, Martin said their offspring that end up on private oyster grounds could and probably would be.

The return of oysters to the bay is important for many reasons.

First, it was once a thriving industry in the region, both for watermen and those who worked in oyster processing houses, which now sit abandoned on most creeks and rivers.

The oyster also acts as a filter for the bay's waters, removing out nutrients that can be harmful to marine life in high levels.

Two participants in last week's tour watched with special attention: Dan Bacot Jr. and Sr. of York River Yacht Haven in Gloucester Point. It's a marina that doubles as an oyster hatchery and nursery, and it's providing the seed oysters for the project.

Bacot Sr. said that one of the reasons these oysters will have a shot at making it is they have been grown to a size capable of reproduction more quickly than oysters currently in the bay.

That, he said, should provide them with a year or so of spawning before reaching the age when the deadly diseases affecting oysters--MSX and Dermo--typically disrupt reproduction.

Allen, of VIMS, said that while Virginia and Maryland may one day decide to use disease-resistant Asian oysters in the restoration effort, this year's trial won't preclude that.

"The process would be the same whether you were using native oysters or Asian oysters," he said, noting that the eventual answer for the bay also could be a combination of the two.

Martin noted that VIMS will be monitoring the results of the five-year project and providing constant feedback on changes that might be necessary.

Others in the group noted that success could be critical for the full funding of the project. Right now, there is no money for it in next year's federal budget, though Virginia officials are lobbying for it to be added.

"Success would go a long way to future funding," said one of the partners as a second boatload of young oysters neared the beds. "Most definitely, a long way."

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